

Luxury versus poverty? Herodotus' view of the Persian Wars

Tim Rood

How did the Greeks come to win the Persian Wars? It has become common to believe that the Greeks won because they were tougher, and the Persians lost because they had been spoiled by luxury. But was that Herodotus' view? Tim Rood investigates.

Herodotus promises at the start of his *Histories* not only to preserve the memory of 'great and marvellous deeds, some displayed by the Greeks, some by the barbarians' but also to explain why they fought each other. The sheer scale of his account of Xerxes' invasion of Greece (480–79 B.C.) suggests that he saw the Greeks' victory over Persia as the greatest and most marvellous of the deeds he records. This account also suggests that Herodotus was as much interested in explaining why the Greeks won as in expounding the causes of the conflict.

Poor tough Greeks, rich weak Persians?

It is often claimed that Herodotus thought that the Greeks won because they were poor and tough, and that the Persians lost because they were rich and weak. This view has proved attractive because it panders to an image of eastern decadence and western superiority that became popular later in antiquity and continues to have a strong influence – just think of the film *300*. And it also seems to be supported by two dramatic highpoints in his work.

The first of these highpoints occurs soon after Xerxes has crossed into Europe. Xerxes holds a review of his immense land and sea forces, and then asks Demaratus, an exiled Spartan king, if the Greeks will be able to withstand his army. Demaratus replies:

King, since you bid me by all means to speak the whole truth, and to say what you will not later prove to be false, in Greece poverty is always endemic, but courage is acquired as the fruit of wisdom and strong law; by use of this courage Greece

defends herself from poverty and tyranny.

Demaratus' words are frequently read as implying that the Greeks' courage is the result of their poverty – with the implication that Persian wealth is likely to breed cowardice.

The second episode occurs after the Greek victory at Plataea in 479 B.C. The Greeks capture an enormous quantity of luxury goods, including the tent of the Persian general. The Spartan general, Pausanias, then stages a comparison between a typical Spartan meal – which is very plain – and an elaborate Persian feast. Again Herodotus lets his character use direct speech to bring out his message:

Men of Greece, I have brought you here because I desired to show you the foolishness of the leader of the Persians who, with such provisions for life as you see, came here to take away from us our possessions which are so pitiful.

Pausanias' focus on Persian luxury picks up a theme that runs through the account of Xerxes' expedition. Herodotus mentions that the Persian king and his table-companions use golden plates and that Persian troops wear necklaces and bracelets. The catalogue of the Persian army immediately before Demaratus' conversation with Xerxes mentions men with spear-butts of golden apples or golden and silver pomegranates. It culminates in the Persian elite unit, the 'Immortals', who had the 'richest adornment of all' and 'stood out by the abundance of gold that they had'. A particularly striking spectacle is provided by the Persian cavalry commander Masistius, who rides 'a horse which had a golden bit and was elaborately adorned all over' and

himself wears 'a purple tunic over a cuirass of golden scales'.

But does Herodotus connect this extraordinary Persian luxury with weakness in battle? When Pausanias contrasts a meagre Spartan meal with a rich Persian feast, his aim is to suggest that the Persians had nothing to gain by invading Greece, not to show that the Persians lost because they are devoted to luxury. Herodotus' readers would have known that Pausanias himself was quite attracted by luxury: he later adopted a Persian lifestyle.

Brave Persians

In his accounts of battles between Greeks and Persians, Herodotus consistently presents the Persians as brave. It is true that they defeat the 300 Spartans at Thermopylae only after being informed of a side-route. But the reason the Spartans were able to resist for so long was that they were fighting in a narrow space and with longer spears. The Spartans kept on withdrawing and then turning to confront the Persians, who darted out at them in small groups. Herodotus points to superior Spartan tactics, not the Persians' lack of courage, as the decisive factor.

The Persians again show bravery in the run-up to Plataea. For all his gold armour, their cavalry commander Masistius makes a bold charge at the Greeks. Though he is finally killed, he is admired by the Greeks for his physical prowess. In his account of the battle itself, Herodotus writes that

the Persians were neither less valorous nor weaker, but they had no armour; moreover, since they were unskilled and no match for their adversaries in craft, they would rush out singly and in tens or in groups great or small, hurling themselves on the Spartans and so perishing.

As at Thermopylae the Persians' problem at Plataea is a matter of equipment and tactics. It is true that there are troops on the Persian side who need to be whipped

into battle, but these are always subjects of the Persians, not the Persians themselves.

The excellence of gold

Far from linking luxury with military softness, Herodotus consistently shows that in Persian culture the wearing of gold carries the expectation of military excellence. He more than once notes that among the Persians those who wear jewellery are their best fighters. They are also the troops who are stationed closest to the king. The Persians are said to value those who are brave in battle; the Persian king himself gives them material rewards. What comes with great luxury is great responsibility.

Herodotus' Persians often have a Homeric resonance. The physical size of the cavalry commander Masistius recalls the strength of Homeric heroes, which is greater than that of mortals in Homer's own time. Their habit of wearing golden armour also links them with Homeric heroes. So too does the militaristic code according to which material rewards are linked to bravery. Even the way the Persians fight in small groups, or singly, recalls Homeric warfare. These various Homeric links point to the factors that made the Persians tough opponents, even if ultimately their heroic manner of fighting proves powerless against the united hoplite phalanx of the Spartans.

The rhetoric of truth

Where does this analysis leave the proud boast of the advantages of the Greeks' poverty that Demaratus makes in his conversation with Xerxes? The very fact that Demaratus is so insistent that he is speaking the truth should put us on our guard. Insistence on truth is a hallmark of a speaker who is manipulating his audience. Demaratus may start by claiming that Greece is poor, but his real point is that wisdom and strong law have given the Greeks courage. Demaratus in fact ends by dissociating poverty from courage. If poverty is native to Greece, the Greeks' courage is an import. It is caused by wisdom and law, not by poverty. Poverty produces the need for courage, rather than courage itself. And Demaratus ends by implying that the Greeks are not poor, since their courage keeps poverty and slavery away.

The start of Demaratus' speech to Xerxes is in any case modified by what he goes on to say, both in this scene and in two follow-up conversations before and after the battle of Thermopylae. He starts by speaking of Greece as a whole, but goes on to claim that the Spartans' distinctive respect for law makes them better fighters than the other Greeks. Later Demaratus introduces a further distinction within

Sparta itself, between the men of highest status, the 'peers', and the other Spartans. Courage is presented as the result not of poverty but of a social code. The Spartans turn out to be not so different from the Persians: the distinctions Demaratus sees within Greece and within Sparta are matched by distinctions within the Persian empire and within Persia. Read in its fuller context, Demaratus' first speech gives no support to the idea that Herodotus attributed the Greeks' victory to their poverty.

Wealthy Athenians

Herodotus himself in telling the story of the war emphasizes the contribution to the Greek success of Athenian wealth. He claims that the Athenians saved Greece by resisting the Persians at sea; but for this, the Persians would have defeated the Greek cities – including Sparta – one by one on land, no matter how brave their defence. And the Athenians' decision to resist at sea was itself made possible by the way they used their wealth.

Some time before the Persian invasion, there had been a war between Athens and Aegina. At this time the Athenians had just had a windfall – the discovery of a new rich vein in the silver mines at Laurium. Themistocles had persuaded the Athenians to use this new-found wealth to build 200 ships – and, Herodotus comments, it was this that 'saved Greece by compelling the Athenians to become seamen'. Herodotus teaches us to look beyond the clichés – to admire the political prudence of the crafty statesman while understanding how warfare is shaped by culture. His wise and dispassionate analysis is as great a marvel as any of the deeds he himself records.

Herodotus' epilogue

Herodotus closes his *Histories* by looking back to an episode in the life of Cyrus, founder of the Persian empire. After Cyrus has conquered Asia, one of the Persians proposes that they should move from harsh and mountainous Persia to a more pleasant land. Cyrus will have none of this: soft lands, he cautions, tend to breed soft peoples – and if the Persians choose to live in the plains they should prepare themselves to be slaves, not rulers.

This closing anecdote is often read as ironic. The Persians may not have gone soft in Cyrus' day, but they did decline by the time of Xerxes. Yet this ironic interpretation is not borne out by the rest of the *Histories*. And the Persians, even if they do start administering the rich lands down in the plains, never actually move from Persia.

Why, then, does Herodotus end with this story? One reason is that the real point of Cyrus' warning is the opposition of

freedom and slavery, not the contrast between poverty and luxury. Another reason may be that Cyrus is showing himself as crafty a statesman as Themistocles and as crafty a speaker as Demaratus. Just put yourself in his shoes – proud victor over a vast continent, and a subordinate thinks he knows better than you what the Persians should do next ...

Tim Rood is currently on sabbatical in the soft land of California; normally he teaches Greek and Latin languages and literature at St Hugh's College in Oxford. He is currently working on a commentary on Xenophon Anabasis books 3–4.